

NewsRelease

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For Release: February 18, 2000

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RELEASE NO. 00-012

NASA LANGLEY SPONSORING NEXT GENERATION OF ENGINEERS

Local students 'gear up' for robotics competition

A team of local high school students sponsored by NASA Langley is preparing to test its skills and its robotic mettle against 38 teams from as far away as New Hampshire.

On March 16-18, 39 teams of high school students will converge on Richmond, Va., at Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Siegel Center to participate in the NASA Langley/VCU For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) regional robotics competition.

Their goal is to find out who designed and built the best robotic "basketball player" in an environment that will look and sound more like a basketball game than a science competition.

Langley is sponsoring a team from the New Horizons Regional Education Center in Hampton, Va., that calls itself the "NASA Knights." Right now, the team is tweaking and testing its robotic representative, which looks like a jumbo video game controller and a roving, six-foot-tall shopping cart with an attitude. FIRST allows just six weeks for a competition-ready robot to emerge from the minds of students and their engineering mentors. The robot is due in Richmond by Feb. 22.

Media Opportunity:

Members of the news media are invited to visit the team at the New Horizons Regional Education Center on Feb. 18, Feb. 21 and Feb. 22 (morning only). To coordinate a visit, contact Bob Allen, NASA Langley Public Affairs, or Dr. Ned Carr, New Horizons Executive Director.

Last year, the New Horizons team placed fifth in the national FIRST robotics competition at Disney's Epcot Center in Orlando, Fla.

Dr. Ned Carr, New Horizons Executive Director, says the competition is a great combination of ideas and experience.

"It is important to know science, but it's even more important to do science," Carr said.

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"The FIRST competition puts students together with engineers and technicians in a real-world setting," he continued. "This kind of experience goes beyond theory. It encompasses all of what we try to do here at New Horizons."

In addition to a financial boost, the New Horizons team gets the benefit of the experience of current and retired NASA engineers and fabrication specialists like Bill Reed, Jeff Seaton, Dave Fahringer and Ansel Butterfield.

Reed, retired from NASA Langley and Dynamic Engineering, Inc., was recently named the 2000 Engineer of the Year by the Peninsula Engineers Council.

He is a veteran of four FIRST competitions, the last three teamed with New Horizons. He also participated in a "world's largest paper airplane" student competition. Reed was with the New Horizons team at the Epcot Center last year.

"Some of these kids had never held a screwdriver before this," Reed said. "Now, some of these young women will be teaching their husbands how to work with tools."

Last year, Reed said, one female student even changed her career path to engineering based on her experience with the FIRST competition.

NASA Langley has provided a total of approximately \$260,000 to support the FIRST regional robotics competition this year.

In addition to a \$35,000 cooperative agreement with New Horizons, Langley is providing \$125,000 to sponsor the regional competition itself and paying the \$5,000 entrance fee for more than half (20 of the 39 teams) the schools participating in the regional event.

NASA has provided \$1.6 million to support FIRST robotics competitions nationally this year. The support is led by the NASA Headquarters Office of Space Science in Washington, DC.

Four NASA Centers are sponsoring FIRST events this year -- NASA Langley; NASA Ames Research Center, Mountain View, Calif.; NASA Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas; and NASA Kennedy Space Center, Fla.

FIRST is a non-profit organization established in 1989 by Dean Kamen, an entrepreneur and inventor with over 100 patents. FIRST's mission is to stimulate students' interest in math and science. In 1992, FIRST began organizing a national robotics competition. The goal of the program is to join high school students with professional engineers and technicians from industry and academia to design, construct and operate the robots. The event that has become known, among other things, as the "superbowl" of engineering and "the ultimate mind sport."

Each year, FIRST develops the robotics competition by supplying a "problem" and a kit of parts to teams of students. The competition is different each year, and the details are kept secret until the unveiling at the competition kick-off. After that, each team has just six weeks to organize, design, build and test its robot.

For more information, visit the FIRST website at: <http://www.usfirst.org/>